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SUBJECT: IRAQI POLITICIANS PRAISE PRESIDENT'S CAIRO SPEECH
AS "A GOOD START," BUT AWAIT ACTION

Classified By: JOHN FOX, ACTING COUNSELOR FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS, E.O. 12958, REASONS 1 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Iraq's political classes almost uniformly praised President Obama's June 4 speech from Cairo as "a good start." However, most contacts told us that the U.S. must follow up with specific actions to consolidate Iraq's fragile democracy and to establish an independent Palestinian state. The glaring exception to the warm reception came from Sadr Trend leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who asserted that the Arab and Muslim world "would not buy the speeches of President Obama until the U.S. withdraws from Iraq and Afghanistan." Sadr said that the President cannot change America's policies in the Middle East alone, because he shares power with other political entities and actors, and those actors "have always been against Islam."

¶2. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT CONTINUED: The reaction to the Cairo speech reflected frustration over two core domestic concerns: Iraqi leaders' worry that the U.S. has shifted attention away from Iraq to Afghanistan, and are concerned about whether the U.S. is committed to implementing the withdrawal deadline laid out in the Security Agreement (septel). Iraqi Kurdish leaders expressed their hope that the Obama Administration will keep Iraq's diversity and minority rights in mind. With several defining milestones over the coming months (U.S. combat troop withdrawal from cities by the end of June, Kurdistan Regional Government elections in July, resolution of Kirkuk provincial status and elections, a possible referendum over the U.S. Security Agreement and parliamentary elections in early 2010) Iraq's leaders want continual reassurance that the U.S. remains fully engaged and committed to the consolidation of institutional and security achievements. One of Iraq's ongoing challenges was illustrated by the fact that power outages and brownouts across Iraq on June 4 prevented many of our contacts from watching the speech live. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

KEY IRAQI LEADERS REACT TO THE SPEECH

¶3. (C) GOI Spokesman Ali Al-Dabbagh stated that the President's speech helped improve understanding between the U.S. and the Islamic world, taking attention away from extremists who have "tarnished Islam." He added that "it is positive that Iraq was not the focus of a U.S. president's speech," inferring from it that Iraq was no longer the worst problem in the region. Dawa MP and key advisor to PM Maliki Sami Al-Askari told poloff that the speech was groundbreaking in that "it was the first time a U.S. president stood up to address the people of this region with utmost respect and appreciation, calling for bilateral relations based on the human values preached by the three holy religions, and on the joint interests between the U.S. and countries of the Islamic world." Al Askari continued, "As an Iraqi...I found that there were assurances on the official U.S. government position in supporting the GOI and its people in building a stable and independent country and to commit to the agreement of withdrawing the U.S. forces on schedule." He added that the speech was not going to change circumstances in the region, especially on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unless it was tied to a fixed policy, and that President Obama would not be able to achieve a final solution before the end of his

term.

-- Ayad Al-Samarraie, Speaker of Parliament and Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) Deputy Secretary General, told us the speech "demonstrated the desire of the U.S. to promote partnership and distance itself from the policy of the previous administration, which damaged the reputation of the U.S. The commitment of President Obama to the withdrawal timetable is a fact that pleases us and reassures usbut imposes on us at the same time the need to work to facilitate this withdrawal through achieving political and security stability and ...reaching a national consensus through the work of the parliament, because disruption will hinder the withdrawal process."

-- Arif Tayfour, Deputy Speaker of Parliament and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) member, told poloff that the speech was a comprehensive approach to the whole Islamic world and said that the comments on Iran were promising. He called on President Obama to pay attention to the rights of minority communities like the Kurds, as President George W. Bush had done.

-- Jalal al-din al-Saghir, ISCI MP, told poloff that the speech was a good step and expected that public reaction would be good. He said that Iraqis were worried that the U.S. will start "preferring one country over another." (Note: Al-Saghir appeared to be referring to Afghanistan. End note.)

-- Maysoon Damluji, Iraqiyya MP told us that the President "said the right things" about Israeli settlements and the Palestinian right to statehood. "The questions is whether he will act on his words."

-- Shatha Al Ebousy, MP (IIP) approved of the President's comments on Iraq's future and sovereignty, and predicted that the President's trip to Saudi Arabia and Egypt would help improve Iraq's relations with those countries.

-- Friad Rwanduzi, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) MP told us: "We all equate Obama with change. Not sure what this means for us in Iraq, especially for the Kurds."

-- Sami Atroshik, Kurdish Islamic Union (KIU) MP told poloff that Obama seems like a good president, but Iraqis need to see concrete gestures. "How the U.S. treats us when Obama's war is now Afghanistan is a big question mark."

-- Fuad Hussein, KRG Chief of Staff, told poloff that the speech was historic, and that Kurds hope "we are still very much in President Obama's policy. We have many issues with the GOI that could use USG support and mediation."

-- Raja Al Khalili, advisor to Vice President Adil Abd Al Mahdi, called the speech "a very new and positive approach, however, Iraqis want to see facts on the ground." Fareed Yasseen, also of the Vice President's staff, called the speech a "slam dunk...if it will be criticized, it will be criticized for being too soft on Israel as a nuclear entity."

-- Dr. Ahmad Abdel Ghafour Al-Samarai, Director of Diwan Al-Waqif Al-Sunni (council of religious endowments), a leading Sunni authority in Iraq, said that the speech "did a significant service for the U.S. and Islamic world alike" and praised the President's references to the Quran. He told us: "I heard a lot from Iraqis who listened to the speech and were heartened by his reference to unity, and I hope that Mr. Obama's speech is printed to distribute to Iraqis so they will know the U.S. is committed to Iraq and to the importance of democracy....We call for Mr. Obama to say in his next speech that Iraq has become a model for realizing democracy. We Iraqis waited for democracy for two decades and will not permit it to be used for sectarianism, racism and illegitimate government."

-- Salma Jabou, President Talabani's advisor on women's issues and director of the Iraqi Widows' Fund, assessed the

speech positively, called for the military withdrawal to continue and for the U.S. to shift focus to civilian institutions. She told us President Obama should establish a plan to execute his seven points and back up the speech with actions. Jabou said President Obama clarified that dialogue has to go both ways and the Islamic world has to change its perspective on the U.S. She suggested that the Obama Administration work on economic and humanitarian issues in the Middle East to gain the respect of the public and to expand efforts to help Iraqi women. (Note: Jabou participated in the town hall meeting in Baghdad with Secretary Clinton on April 25, 2009. End note.)

-- Ahmad Mofeed, chief of staff to Da'wa MP Ali Al-Adeeb, told poloffs that the speech illustrated the need to facilitate dialogue between countries in order to improve understanding.

-- Dr. Rownak, aide to Vice President Tariq Al-Hashimi, noted the "new tone and good intentions" of the speech, but said that it must be followed by action. She said that the President appears to be playing the role of intermediary between religious and cultures, but cautioned that the situation is more complex than the president portrayed, Qsituation is more complex than the president portrayed, especially among Muslims.

-- Subhi Haider, a leader of the Shi'a Kurd Qarash tribe, told us that Iraqis were comforted that the President intends to honor promises made to withdraw forces from Iraq.

-- Ibrahim Shafi, a school principal in Irbil and member of the Shi'a Kurd Shafaq organization, told poloff that the President gained credibility by quoting the Quran, and corrected the impression in the Islamic world about how the U.S. deals with Muslims.

-- Adnan Aziz of Shafaq reiterated that President Obama has to live up to the speech with concrete actions.

-- Reform Trend MP Fallih Al Fayyad and ISCI MP Tahsin Al-Azzawi told poloffs that the U.S. chose wisely to give the speech in Egypt in a secular academic institution, rather than in Saudi Arabia, as Egypt is "moderate ground" and remained the heart of the Arab world. Al-Azzawi stated that it will take time to move the U.S. government, as President Obama alone does not have the power to change the direction of the Israeli-Palestinian issue and other conflicts.

IT'S STILL ABOUT THE WARS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

14. (U) Sadr Trend leader and Muqtada Al-Sadr told the press immediately after President Obama's speech that "the Arab world will not buy Obama's speeches, and they will not believe anything until the U.S. withdraws forces from Iraq and Afghanistan." Sadr said that it is not up to the President to change the direction of U.S. policy, noting that he shares power with other political actors and entities. He asserted that those entities "have always been against Islam."

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